THE NEW LIGHTS

(The Christian Church)

JOHN VANT STEPHENS

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BY

JOHN VANT STEPHENS

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A PERSONAL WORD

On June 27, 1941, I published "The Genesis of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church." The book has received commendations from historians and other competent judges. It was published for the purpose of correcting misapprehensions about the origin and the early history of this Church. One of these misapprehensions, of long standing, confused the Cumberland Presbyterians with the New Lights. In the book, the story of the New Lights was followed only far enough to correct the wrong impression that had been made by some writers to the effect that the Cumberland Presbyterians and the New Lights had the same origin, if, indeed, they were not one and the same.

Some of the readers of the book have expressed a desire for additional information about the New Lights. A volume might be written on the subject. However, I hope that this brief brochure may, in some measure, supply the information desired concerning this religious group, so much in evidence over a hundred years ago in Northern Kentucky and Southwestern Ohio, which made a lasting impression on American Church history.

"The Genesis of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church," with its bibliography, which may be found in many leading libraries of the country, will be of service to those who may desire a more comprehensive view of the forces at work in those early days on the American frontier.

JOHN VANT STEPHENS

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In what is now the State of Kentucky there were two centers of the Great Revival of 1800. One was in the Green River settlement, located in the "Cumberland Country," Southern Kentucky, out of which the Cumberland Presbyterian Church originated; the other was in "Northern Kentucky," located in the "Kentucky Country," out of which the New Lights sprang. The Northern Kentucky settlement was some two hundred miles northeast of the Green River settlement.* There were some striking similarities in the revival in these two sections of the country, such as camp meetings and emotionalism, but there were also vital differences, which writers have not adequately treated, and for the most part even have overlooked.

The Rev. James Smith, in his "History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church," the most dependable treatise on the subject, pub-

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* For a map showing the locations of the "Cumberland Country" and the "Kentucky Country" see "The Genesis of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church," opposite page 1.

lished in 1835, out of print, says: "It cannot be denied that nearly all the ministers who were most actively engaged in promoting the revival in that section [Northern Kentucky], countenanced and encouraged the wild delusions of the multitude, and propagated heresies of the most dangerous nature, which resulted in the formation of the body known by the names of Marshallites, or Stoneites, and sometimes New Lights, or as they called themselves 'Christians.'" The Rev. Dr. Robert Davidson, in his "History of the Presbyterian Church in Kentucky," published in 1847, out of print, supports Mr. Smith in the above statement. The Rev. Dr. E. H. Gillett, in his "History of the Presbyterian Church," says that "exhorters and preachers, some of them of the wildest notions, were approved and sent out upon their mission." He also states that the "New Lights [were] led off by Stone."

Dr. Davidson explains that in "the contagion of enthusiasm" the group "began to be known familiarly by the epithet *'New Lights,'*" and they are so referred to by various writers, recording the history of the period. Indeed, members of the group, in a publication (1811) speak of themselves as "The New Light Church." The Rev. Dr. William W. Sweet, author of "Religion on the American Frontier," discusses "The New Light Schism."

A New Denomination Launched

The New Lights received an impetus, if not their beginning, in a case of a doctrinal ecclesiastical discipline, which led Revs. Barton W. Stone, Robert Marshall, Richard McNemar, John Thomson and John Dunlavy to withdraw from the Presbyterian Church, and to constitute "The Presbytery of Springfield." They "assumed for themselves," says Dr. Gillett, "the title of 'The Christian Church.'" Coming to see the inconsistency of their contention with an organized Presbytery, after nine months, they issued a strange document entitled "The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery," and dissolved the organization. Dr. Davidson says: "They maintained that all creeds and Confessions ought to be rejected; and that the Bible alone, without note or comment, should be the bond of Christian fellowship."

These ministers, says Dr. Davidson, "already highly popular, exerted themselves to the utmost to attract the multitude. . . . Such progress was made, that before the end of the year 1804, there were regular societies organized on completely democratic principles at Turtle Creek, Eagle Creek, Springfield, Orangedale, Salem, Beaver Creek, and Clear Creek, in the State of Ohio; Cabin Creek, Flemingsburg, Concord, Cane Ridge, Indian

Creek, Bethel, Paint Lick, and Shawnee Run, in Kentucky; besides a great multitude of like sentiment dispersed through Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, and Western Pennsylvania. These persons are described by McNemar as 'praying, shouting, jerking, barking, or rolling; dreaming, prophesying, and looking as through a glass, at the infinite glories of Mount Zion, just about to break open upon the world.' "

Dr. Sweet writes: "Thus was launched a new denomination in the West. The seceding ministers had carried their congregations with them into the new Church. In Southwestern Ohio where Richard McNemar was the pastor of the Turtle Creek church, every Presbyterian church with their ministers were swept into the new organization except two. The name *Christian,* which had been adopted in 1804, was well calculated to win the allegiance of frontier people, and the substitution of the Bible for man-made creeds found also ready support." At first the ministers in the new Church were not agreed among themselves on the doctrine of water baptism, either as to the mode or the subjects; but later adopted immersion as the only mode and rejected infant baptism.

Father and Sons

The Rev. John Thomson and the Rev. Robert Marshall, two of the five ministers mentioned above, late in 1811, returned to the Presbyterian Church. Mr. Thomson was the pastor of the Springfield church when he withdrew from the denomination. This church, a short distance from Cincinnati, is now known as the Springdale church. The change in name was due to a change in the name of the post office. The church was organized in 1792. Only two churches in the Presbytery of Cincinnati were organized at an earlier date. Mr. Thomson was the pastor of the church from 1801 to 1803, when he withdrew from the denomination, and after his return he was the pastor from 1811 to 1832, after which he transferred to the Presbytery of Crawfordsville, and for a time continued his ministerial activities, making his home with his sons in Crawfordsville, Indiana.

Mr. Thomson was the father of five sons who deserve mention in this connection. Four of these sons became Presbyterian ministers. The Rev. James Thomson for a number of years was pastor of the Presbyterian church in Crawfordsville, Indiana. He and his brother, John Steele Thomson, were two of the nine founders of Wabash College, a Presbyterian institution located in Crawfordsville,

Indiana. James was accorded a position of precedence among the nine. John Steele taught mathematics in the college. Another son, the Rev. Samuel S. Thomson, taught Latin in the college from 1846 to 1885. Mr. Alexander Thomson, another son, was a trustee of the college from 1844 to 1899 and treasurer from 1864 to 1891. Another son, the Rev. Dr. William M. Thomson, was a missionary in Syria for over forty years. He is the author of "The Land and the Book," in three large volumes, for many years the most popular work on the subject, and these volumes are yet useful.

What Became of the New Lights?

What became of the New Lights, who called themselves "The Christian Church"? The answer to this question is somewhat complicated. Apparently some congregations, how many is not known, took an independent course and have been lost in obscurity. However, the main body of the New Lights were absorbed by other religious bodies. Some joined the "Society of Believers," better known as "Shakers." By far the larger number united with two other groups, as shown below, to form the body known as "Christians," or "The Christian Connection." Later a minority of this group, under the leadership of Barton

W. Stone, withdrew from the "Christians" or "The Christian Connection" and became associated with the Alexander Campbell movement, so breaking up the original New Lights into three parts, as indicated in the following pages.

I. THE UNITED SOCIETY OF BELIEVERS OR SHAKERS.

This Society originated in England. The "Believers" were followers of Ann Lee, who was born in Manchester, England, in 1736, and died in this country in 1784. Ann was revered by her followers as the second appearance of Christ on earth. She was a member of the Society of Quakers. In a persecution of the Quakers in England, she was cast into prison, where she claimed to have seen Christ, and from whom she claimed to have received a revelation to the effect that the only way mankind could be restored to the proper relation with God was by leading a celibate life. The first community in this country was organized at Mount Lebanon, New York, in 1792. The Quakers who joined Mother Ann are said to have been noted for "unusual and violent manifestations of religious fervor," and so were spoken of as "Shaking Quakers," hence the term "Shakers."

Following 1805 there was a period of great missionary activity, directed from the Shaker

headquarters at New Lebanon, New York. Hearing of the Great Revival in Kentucky, three Shakers made a visit of exploration, arriving at Paint Lick, Kentucky. The Rev. Barton W. Stone, the chief leader of the New Lights, gives an account of these missionaries as follows: "Three missionary Shakers from the East came among us—Bates, Mitchum, and Young. . . . They informed us that they had heard of us in the East, and greatly rejoiced in the work of God amongst us—that as far as we had gone we were right; but we had not gone far enough into the work—that they were sent by their brethren to teach us the way of God more perfectly, by obedience to which we should be led into perfect holiness. They seemed to understand all the springs and avenues of the human heart. They urged the people to confess their sins to them, especially the sins of matrimony, and to forsake them all immediately—husbands must forsake their wives, and wives their husbands. They said they could perform miracles, and related many as done by them. But we could never persuade them to try to work miracles among us. . . . Many confessed their sins to them, and forsook the marriage state; among them were three of our preachers, Matthew Houston, Richard McNemar, and John Dunlavy."

Dr. Davidson names several New Light ministers, who with their people went over

to the Shakers. Dr. Sweet states that several congregations were lost to the Shakers. The extent of this loss cannot be determined with exactness. This was the period of the Shakers' greatest growth. Societies were established in Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, and in Eastern States. But they soon began to die out. The Census of the Religious Forces in 1890 shows that the Shakers were represented, at this time, by small numbers in Connecticut, Kentucky, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, and Ohio, the total membership then being only 1,728. The census of 1936 reports only 92 members, a loss of 100 in the ten-year period since 1926.

II. THE CHRISTIANS.

The Rev. Dr. H. K. Carroll, in "The Religious Forces of the United States," based on the census of 1890, states that this group was commonly known as "The Christian Connection." This Church was formed by a loose affiliation of three organizations, representing as many geographical centers. Dr. Carroll states that "these three movements, each independent and unknown to the others until 1806, were alike in taking the Bible as the rule of faith, and rejecting Calvinism." Note these three movements.

1. *Movement Number One.*

The pioneer of this three-fold movement was the Rev. James O'Kelly, a Methodist minister in Virginia. The first General Conference of the Methodist Church was held in Baltimore in 1792. One of the most important events of the Conference was a conflict between Bishop Francis Asbury, the first Methodist Bishop consecrated in America, and the Rev. James O'Kelly, who proposed that "after the Bishop appoints the preachers at Conference to their several circuits, if any one thinks himself injured by the appointment, he shall have liberty to appeal to the Conference and state his objections; and if the Conference approve his objections, the Bishop shall appoint him to another circuit."

The proposed change was defeated by a large majority. Mr. O'Kelly refused to abide by the vote of the Conference. He and his followers withdrew from the Methodist Church. The Rev. Dr. J. M. Buckley, in "A History of the Methodists in the United States," says: "In some places they led away whole societies, and in others threw the Church into confusion." At one time the new organization numbered several thousand. The new body bore the name of "The Republican Methodist Church." At this time there was considerable political interest in the country growing out

of the contest between the Federalist Party, led by Alexander Hamilton, and the Republican Party, led by Thomas Jefferson. It was this political agitation in the country that led the O'Kelly group to choose this name, emphasizing Mr. O'Kelly's idea of representation in the government of the Church as well as in the national government. However, in 1794, the name was changed to "The Christian Church," which discarded all creeds and recognized the Bible as the only book of authority. Following this change of name there was a division in the Church.

2. *Movement Number Two.*

This movement occurred in New England, among the Baptists, beginning in 1800. Dr. Abner Jones, a physician, while living in Lyndon, Vermont, became convinced that "sectarian names and human creeds should be abandoned, and that true piety alone, and not the externals of it, should be made the test of Christian fellowship and communion." He became so obsessed of this idea that he gave up his practice of medicine and began to preach. He organized a "Christian Church" in Lyndon, in 1801. In 1802, he organized two churches in New Hampshire. He was joined by the Rev. Elias Smith, a Baptist minister of Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

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From this time on Dr. Jones traveled and preached almost incessantly, in an ever-widening circle, reaching Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, New York, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Eastern Massachusetts. Mr. Smith traveled all over New England and into the South. Both men did some constructive work. The movement gathered headway. Ministers were raised up and churches were organized. J. R. Freese, M. D., an early historian of the movement, says: "Both ministers and people flocked to the standard when once it was fairly unfurled, and it seemed only necessary to persuade the people to 'search the Scriptures' in order to make them Christians! Churches were organized throughout many portions of New England. Many young preachers were soon raised up in those churches, some of whom traveled almost continually from place to place, preaching with great zeal and success. Some were induced to extend their visits beyond the limits of New England."

The Rev. Dr. Milo True Morrill, in "A History of the Christian Denomination in America," says: "The movement under Jones and Smith gathered headway, ministers were raised up, churches organized, the new unsectarian doctrines were everywhere proclaimed, until the whole amounted to a veritable up-

heaval in church circles in New England, forming a part of the larger movement for religious liberty and abolition of Calvinistic tyranny. . . . Smith traveled all over New England, and into the South, and results like those recited followed him. He not only did some excellent constructive work, but he was a mighty destructive engine also."

Dr. Simon Addison Bennett, of Elon College, North Carolina, states that on "September 1, 1808, Elias Smith issued the first religious newspaper in the world under the title *'Herald of Gospel Liberty.'* He selected the name for his paper with a good deal of care and issued a paper true to the title it bore." It was not until 1806 that even the leaders of these three movements were aware of its three-fold character, the people still being in ignorance of this fact. The Rev. Dr. W. B. Wellons, editor and educator, a leader among the Christians, explains how the masses of the membership in these three sections were informed of the existence of these various groups. Copies of the *"Herald of Gospel Liberty"* found their way through the mails to the people. He says: "Those who were called Christians in the West and in the South were astonished to find a similar organization in the East, and up to this time [1808], the Western and Southern branches

knew nothing of each other. A correspondence was opened through the *'Herald of Gospel Liberty'* between the three divisions, of what seemed to be the same family." Dr. Freece states that "in 1817, Elder [Elias] Smith came out a Universalist," whereupon fellowship was withdrawn from him. Later, James O'Kelly, Abner Jones and Barton W. Stone were mentioned with honor as leaders in their respective movements, but Smith's name was not mentioned.

3. *Movement Number Three.*

This was the New Light, or Christian, movement already considered in these pages.

As pointed out by Dr. Carroll, these three movements (the O'Kelly-Methodist in Virginia, the Baptist in New England, and the New Light or Christian, led by Presbyterian seceders, in Northern Kentucky and Southwestern Ohio) were "alike in taking the Bible as the rule of faith," though the leaders of any particular movement knew nothing about the other two movements before 1806. On learning of their similarity of belief, it was natural that the leaders of these three movements should desire a closer, sympathetic affiliation. But how could this affiliation be achieved? Through their conferences? Referring to the three groups that composed the

Christian Connection, Dr. Bennett says: "Denominational consciousness has come only through a gradual process of development. It is impossible to set any given date when the various groups became united into a body and felt themselves a part of a denomination." He follows this statement with a list of dates and names of places of conferences, but these were of a rather loose order. Dr. Freese describes the earlier scope of conferences as follows: "There was no connection between the several conferences any farther than by correspondence and interchange of messengers. Each is an independent body." The Rev. Dr. J. J. Summerbell, a recognized authority on this subject, states that "they [these three movements] came together without negotiations or formal organic action."

On the development of conferences, Dr. Morrill says: "The order of conference development seems, therefore, to be: first, the general meeting; then the elders' conference, which was forerunner of the local conference; third, the delegated conference of ministers and laymen; fourth, the regularly formed local conference; and the General Conference, including the whole brotherhood." A very important conference was held in Cincinnati, in 1854.

It is stated in the Census of Religious Bodies, 1936, that "general meetings, the first

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step toward organization, were held in New England as early as 1809, but it was not until 1819 that the first General Conference met at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on the call of Frederick Plummer [of Movement Three (?)], of Pennsylvania, and Edward B. Rollings, of New Hampshire. The Conference met again at Windham, Connecticut, in 1820, and regularly until 1832, when it was dissolved; but the following year, by the action of several [local] conferences, a General Convention was organized. In 1834, by direction of the Convention, the Christian General Book Association was formed, and thereafter met once in four years in connection with the Convention, the same persons being delegates to both bodies. This form of organization continued until 1860, when the two bodies became entirely separated. In 1886, the General Convention, then called the 'American Christian Convention,' and the Publication Board, then called the 'Christian Publication Association,' were again made identical in membership."

III. THE STONE-CAMPBELL AFFILIATION.

The Census of the Religious Bodies, 1936, further states that "in the year 1829 Alexander Campbell and his followers separated from the Baptists of Pennsylvania and Ohio. Their teaching spread rapidly to Kentucky,

and in 1832 Barton W. Stone, one of the most prominent of the original leaders of the Christians [later affiliated with the Christian Connection] in that section, united with them, on the condition that the Bible alone should be the basis of the union. A large number of the Christians [Christian Connection] in Kentucky and Ohio followed Mr. Stone in this action, but even in these States the greater part remained with the original body [the Christian Connection], while the eastern and southern churches were not affected. Out of this movement, however, some confusion of names has arisen, since many of the churches of the Disciples are still known as 'Christian' churches."

Referring to the Stone-Campbell union, Mr. Stone makes an enlightening remark: "The only distinguishing doctrine between us and them [A. Campbell and his associates] was, that they preached baptism for the remission of sins to believing penitents. This doctrine had not generally obtained amongst us, though some had received it, and preached accordingly." Such was Mr. Stone's evaluation of the Campbell movement. What was Mr. Campbell's evaluation of the New Light movement? In 1843 he raised this question: "Whither has fled the New Lightism of former days? How long will its speculations be remembered that floated on the winds of

thirty years? Presbyterians, and all other parties in the field, could not dispose of it, till the pleaders [Campbell and his disciples] for the Reformation arose in the length and breadth of the land."

Now turn again to The Christian Connection, and follow the census report further. "In the report for 1890 the denomination was listed as 'Christian (Christian Connection),' and the same name was used in 1906. This did not prove entirely satisfactory, and after some conference the name 'Christian Church (American Christian Convention),' the title already officially chosen by the Church, was adopted for the 1916 report, as identifying the denomination with its general business obligation. This title was in 1922 changed to 'Christian Church (General Convention of the Christian Church).' "

The Church founded colleges. The following institutions of learning belong to the Church or are affiliated with it: Union Christian College, Christian Biblical Institute (a theological seminary), Elon College, Starkey Seminary, Defiance College, Palmer College, and Kansas Christian College. But Antioch College, at Yellow Springs, Ohio, deserves special mention. It was founded in 1853. It admitted from the beginning men and women on equal terms. Horace Mann, a member of

the Christian Church, was its first President, a position he held as long as he lived. Dr. Nicholas Murray Butler says that he "was one of the most brilliant and energetic educational leaders in the United States." Unfortunately, on account of financial difficulties, Antioch College was lost to the Unitarians.

Christian versus Disciple

Dr. Bennett makes a statement, quoted below in part, about the "Christians" and the "Reformers," which indicates the relationship of these two groups, in these early days, as follows: "Thomas Campbell reached America in 1807. His son, Alexander, arrived in 1809. Under the Campbells a 'Reformers' movement grew up which the Disciples of Christ date from the issuance of the 'Declaration and Address' in 1809. The origin of this movement is quite similar to that of the Christians. Thomas and Alexander Campbell were puzzled by conditions similar to those that had previously confronted Stone and those associated with him. In 1813 they decided that immersion was the New Testament mode of baptism and were baptized by a Baptist minister. From this time until 1830 the movement of the Campbells was a 'Reformers' movement among the Baptists. Being excluded from the Baptists in 1830, the

Reformers were forced to seek independent organization and became a separate denomition. Since the name Christian had already been taken by another body, the name Disciples of Christ was taken by the Reformers as their new name.

"For several years the 'Reformers' among the Baptists, led by Alexander Campbell, had been working side by side in Kentucky and Ohio with the Christians. They were much alike in belief and practice and each influenced the other. The Christians had not made baptism a test of fellowship but received converts on their confession of faith and extended them the 'hand of fellowship' on receiving them into the church. Baptism was left to the conscience of the individual, although some of the ministers were quite strong in the advocacy of immersion as the proper mode. Many of the Christians and Reformers were so near together that it seemed useless to quarrel and perpetuate strife. The desire for the union of all followers of Christ advocated by both parties led to a so-called union that has been much misunderstood. This took place January 1, 1832. It must be understood that this was in the early period of both movements. The Disciples were only beginning a separate existence and the Christians had no adequate machinery to consummate union. What took

place at Lexington, Kentucky, in 1832, cannot be called a union in the sense we use the term today. It was more accurately a working agreement among certain leaders in both movements. Very important results have taken place because of this agreement, and in fact it resulted in the union of a large section of the Christians with the Disciples. . . .

"There was a union of the Reformers or Disciples of Christ and a part of the Christians. To say that Barton W. Stone and the others associated with him joined the Disciples of Christ Church would be a misstatement of the case. It would be equally untrue to say that Alexander Campbell and those associated with him joined the Christian Church. Nor was there an organic union of the two denominations. The facts indicate a flowing together of two streams. One stream, a part of the Christian movement; the other stream, the Reformed movement headed by Alexander Campbell and just emerging from the Baptists. The streams blended, each influencing the other and giving a resultant quite different from either."

Continuing, Dr. Bennett says: "The Christian Church has had a very large influence in the work of the Disciples of Christ. The stream of the Christians that merged with the Disciples has been a very formative part in the great achievements of that body of peo-

ple. The great emphasis of the early Disciples movement was 'back to the primitive Church,' back to the 'apostolic practice,' back to the 'ancient order.' Their great emphasis in preaching has been on the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles, taking their start from Pentecost. Among the Christians the emphasis was turned more to Jesus and the Gospels. The burden of preaching has centered more upon Jesus, his love and spirit, than upon the apostles."

The Rev. Dr. B. B. Tyler, in his "History of the Disciples of Christ," says: "Mr. Stone favored the name Christian; Mr. Campbell preferred the name Disciple. Stone and his friends maintained that the name Christian was given, in the beginning, by divine authority. This Mr. Campbell and his friends denied. They also preferred, as less offensive to good people, and quite as Scriptural, to say the least, as the name Christian, the name Disciple."

Regardless of the merits of these two opinions, Mr. Stone's contention seems to have made a deep and lasting impression on the Disciples of Christ, as subsequent history indicates, for many local churches of the Disciples of Christ go by the name Christian and not Disciple.

Recapitulation

What became of the New Lights? Some congregations took an independent course and were lost in obscurity. Some were lost to the Shakers. The remainder, after a time, until 1832 were in affiliation with the O'Kelly-Methodist movement in Virginia and the Baptist movement in New England, the three groups in affiliation being known as the Christians or The Christian Connection. As indicated, Barton W. Stone, in 1832, led a number of the original Northern Kentucky and Southwestern Ohio New Lights out of the Christian Connection into an affiliation with Alexander Campbell and his followers. Dr. Summerbell states that more than fifty churches were thus lost to the Christian Connection. He adds: "This element [the Stone] in the Disciple denomination clung to the name 'Christian,' so that there has been some confusion, many supposing that the Disciples were the original body. But the Disciples differ from the Christians in giving fellowship exclusively to the immersed; while the Christians make Christian character their only test of fellowship or membership." But even with this loss, it is said that "the greater part [of the New Lights] remained with the original body," the Christian Connection with

which, for some years, they had been in affiliation.

The total membership of the Christians (the Christian Connection), according to the census report of 1926, was 112,795, distributed among a number of States, Ohio containing the largest number of any State. In 1931 the General Convention of the Christian Church (not Disciple) was merged with the National Council of the Congregational Churches in the United States.